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DISCUSSION

THE COMMISSION FORM OF GOVERNMENT AND THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL SYSTEM

I have watched, with small returns, the educational journals for notes and articles giving evidence of attention on the part of school men to the bearings of the movement toward the commission form of municipal government upon school organization. There seems to be too little concern about the possibilities of this development. Even university courses in organization and administration have in many cases not yet taken up the subject.

From the organizations urging the new form of government there is also little material to be secured. Sacramento, Cal., has in charge of education one of the five commissioners, whose acts are reviewed by the board. In the second-class cities of Kansas one of the three commissioners has the unusual task of taking charge of education and finance. In most of the cities adopting the commission form the schools have been unchanged, because of their organization as a district distinct from other units. In some cases, as the bosses have come to understand the movement, they have not been slow to avail themselves of the chance to take advantage of the change for their own purposes. There is need of watchfulness and of participation on the part of all who have concern in the schools. Probably there has been much of both, but it is time for the evidence to be forthcoming.

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DEBATING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

In an article published in the October *School Review*, Miss Bertha Lee Gardner subjects inter-high-school debating to a microscopic analysis, and finds it literally cankered with corrupt practices and corroding influences. She finds that this insidious institution, by its second-hand, superficial, quibbling, and insincere method of handling questions far too ambitious for high-school pupils, has sapped the moral fiber of our students and bred an insincerity of conviction. She deplores the idea of "contest," and thinks the ethics of the inter-high-school debate below those of the mediaeval tournament, the prize fight, and even below the parlous depths of inter-high-school athletic contests. She does not approve of springing surprises on one's opponents, and regards the advance preparation of rebuttal as regrettable if not actually reprehensible. That the efforts of the coach are reflected in the work of the debaters indicates a condition which Miss Gardner thinks in need of immediate reform.

Is not this arraignment a trifle too severe?

When it is conceded that the coach is indispensable to successful inter-high-school debating, and when it is further agreed that debaters frequently reflect the peculiar style and methods of their coach, has any further criticism been passed than with equal truth must be given to the teacher and the text who first guide the boy's unwilling feet into the labyrinth of literature? Could anything be more superficial; could any judgment be more second-hand; could any language be less spontaneous than when the boy attempts a comparative criticism of various styles and authors? The student in physics and chemistry, while supposed to be working out laws and principles for himself, rarely does anything of the sort. He accepts of necessity some "second-hand" knowledge, and consequently makes progress. Left by himself to mess with the compounds found in the laboratory, unguided by information which someone else had compiled for his benefit, the average student in his "spontaneous enthusiasm" would accomplish little of value. Without the assistance of a coach, how is the boy to inform himself as to the construction of a really effective argument? Who is to give the boy the instruction and training necessary to a really convincing style of delivery? Is the whole practice of inter-high-school debating to be condemned because the boy unconsciously imitates the gestures and methods of the coach? It would be as logical to condemn the work of the normal critic teacher because her students adopt many of her personal peculiarities and mannerisms. The aspersions cast by Miss Gardner on the part played by the coach in inter-high-school debating, unfortunately for her argument, are rendered innocuous by the records in after-life of the men whom the coach has trained. Out of the high school and away from his influence, these young men have carried into colleges and universities, into the law and the ministry, an ability to argue logically, speak convincingly, and investigate thoroughly. The debating coach, more than any other teacher with whom these boys have come in contact, has given them this training. The writer has investigated the out-of-school record of a score of debaters trained under the pernicious influence described by Miss Gardner, and in nearly every instance discovered that the boy, either in college or in business or the professions, has demonstrated his ability to speak convincingly and investigate carefully. None of them appear to have had their morals undermined and none of them seem incapable of sincere conviction. Not one of the twenty but retains to this day an active interest in the public questions which he debated while in high school.

Miss Gardner complains that the tendency of present-day debating is to develop sharpeners instead of thinkers. Is not this what G. Stanley Hall would call a feminine argument? In an age when legal technicalities play so large a part in the transaction of everyday business, when all scientific investigation worthy of the name is dependent on precise thinking, is there anything reprehensible in a debater insisting upon a strict interpretation of the question under discussion? Last year the writer listened to a debate on the question: "Resolved: That All Cities in Michigan Should Have a Commission Form of

Government." The negative insisted that the commission form of government did not necessarily involve the referendum and recall, and substantiated their argument by citing some fifteen cities having the commission form of government which did not have these reforms. The affirmative were surprised, and their whole argument was vitiated, because they had assumed that the commission form of government necessarily involved the referendum and recall. The affirmative were beaten because their preparation of the question was less intensive than that of their opponents. The writer has taken part in, judged, coached, and listened to over two score debates, and has never heard a question more strictly construed than a careful business man should construe the text of a paper he is about to sign. Is a training which puts a premium on careful statement, strict interpretation, and accurate expression ethically inferior to the prize fight? One fears that Miss Gardner's knowledge of the prize ring must be "second-hand." As to Miss Gardner's inference that only in inter-high-school debates are surprises ethically permissible, it might be said that the baseball pitcher, the football quarter, and the basketball captain move heaven and earth to accomplish a play for which their opponents are unprepared. Nowhere in the realm of sport is the chance to guard against surprise greater than in debating. Nothing but thorough preparation is required. Fulness of preparation cannot but prepare the debater for rebuttal of his opponent's arguments. That he writes in advance his replies to statements which he anticipates is a practice which has the sanction of usage by every public speaker worth listening to. Lincoln knew exactly what he would ask Douglas and what he would say to the reply that Douglas would make. The lawyer who goes into court unprepared to answer an argument which he knows his opponent is liable to make is either exceptionally able or exceptionally foolish. But it is a great error to suppose, because a boy has prepared in advance his answers to the possible arguments of the rival team, that he does nothing worthy on rebuttal. He must allow properly for his time, he must select the most vulnerable point for attack, he must avoid inconsistencies, and he must arrange his material so that it will appear to the greatest advantage. Rapid thinking, quick wit, earnestness, and confidence are requisite to good rebuttal, and very few debaters escape without the cultivation of these qualities. The writer saw a high-school boy from Burlington, Ia., with a black-board and chalk, completely refute in a three-minute arithmetical operation an obviously unforeseen argument of the rival team. Another lad from Davenport, Ia., the last speaker for his team, combined his constructive and rebuttal speeches, and for fifteen minutes, in rapid, forceful, and coherent English, he assailed the argument of his opponents in a manner that left no doubt that his speech was constructed as he proceeded. Another debater from Cedar Rapids, Ia., upon rebuttal quoted five authorities on a controverted point which could not have been other than unexpected. In a debate between the high schools of Grand Rapids and Petoskey, Mich., on the "exclusive control of railroads by the federal government," there was no dispute over the

word "control," but there appeared to be a difference of opinion as to the word "exclusive" as applied to government control. One boy used a dictionary, another quoted two supreme-court decisions, a third appealed for what he called a common-sense interpretation of the question, a fourth called attention to an inconsistency in the arguments of the rival team, a fifth recapitulated the whole case. Such work deserves better characterization than to be dubbed second-hand, servile, and superficial.

Miss Gardner suggests that public questions are too ambitious for high-school students. Does this mean that the future citizens of the Republic shall not concern themselves with vital issues before their city, state, or nation? And if, in spite of their course of study or because of it, they do become acquainted with some of the great questions of public policy, should discussion be prohibited because, forsooth, Congress sits year after year without reaching a satisfactory solution? If, peradventure, such discussion engenders sufficient interest to produce a formal debate involving a thorough search for material and a careful arrangement of arguments, is it a matter to be sneered at as being too ambitious? Again, could any debate on a vital public question be more second-hand than a discussion of some of the subjects that Miss Gardner suggests as substitutes: "Could Brutus have saved the republic?" "Was the execution of Charles I justifiable?" etc.? The discussion of such subjects may be desirable for the life they put into a recitation, but after all they are largely superficial, always second-hand, and never vital. The whole class never take part in them except in theory, and without the assistance of the boys interested in formal debating such discussions would lose a large part of that spontaneity of which Miss Gardner thinks them so productive. Surely there is as much sincerity on the part of the Iowa boy debating the commission form of government or the Michigan boy discussing the primary-school money as there is in the boy's opinions on Hamlet's sanity. Could the average boy be more superficial in his discussion of a vital public issue than he is in his comparison of Themistocles and Aristides?

As to debating topics of local interest only, one cannot but wonder whether the supply of questions will be sufficient. It is also a matter of serious doubt whether the interest which Miss Gardner has aroused in the discussion of these purely local questions would have been possible without the influence of the formal high-school debate. It is the idea of "contest" that has popularized debating. The despised rhetoricals and the now defunct declamation contest were succeeded by the formal oratorical contest, which has attained a measure of popularity and is still with us. But it has been the formal debate that has made public speaking really popular. The institution which Miss Gardner finds so pernicious has made it popular to investigate public questions; it has set a standard of excellence in the arrangement of effective argument; it has stimulated an interest in real oratory, which Cicero defines as the power to convince. It has required no compulsion to insure its success. The writer has known as high as 30 per cent of the Junior and Senior boys to enter the preliminary

contests, held for the purpose of selecting the team to represent the high school. In nearly every high school where there is the custom of inter-high-school debating, a debating society or student congress supplies an abundance of material anxious to compete for the honor of representing the high school in the formal debate. If it is true that the attention of the coach is concentrated on a few, the remedy is to have more coaches rather than to diminish the activities of those we already have.

In conclusion, is it not well in the criticism of any institution to refrain from underestimating its real services? The defects inevitable to any school activity should not blind one to its undeniable merits.

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